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SOME OBSERVATIONS IN GERMAN SCHOOLS

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One frequently hears criticism of the lecture method of teaching when it is employed in the elementary school. Superintendents are accustomed to tell teachers that they talk too much to their classes and allow the children too little opportunity to express what they have learned at home or read out of books. The American visitor in the elementary schools of Germany is very much impressed by the fact that in those schools an entirely different attitude is assumed toward this matter of oral instruction. In fact, one may say that the German method of instruction is predominantly the lecture method.

In most of the *Volksschulen* the children are very meagerly supplied with books. For example, the only textbook which they have for the work in geography is an atlas. In many of the schools the children are not supplied even with an atlas. There is no home study of geography. The children get their information from the statements made by the teachers. The usual method of procedure is for the teacher to refer to a wall map or to the maps which lie before the pupils in their atlases and to describe some region which is the subject of consideration. Incidentally it may be remarked that for the most part the regions selected are parts of the German Empire. Relatively little attention is given to the rest of the world, and the other parts of the world that are selected are emphasized in the degree in which they afford opportunities for colonial settlements or trade with the German Empire. After the description of the region has been given by the teacher and the names have been pointed out on the map or looked up in the atlases, the teacher asks the members of the class a series of questions based upon what he has said. These questions are not unlike the questions heard in the ordinary American classroom except that they are of necessity confined very definitely to the material which the

teacher has presented. From time to time in an American classroom questions arise which demand of the pupils some research in books other than the textbooks. Not so in a German classroom of the *Volksschule*. Sometimes the questioning comes at the end of the period, the first part having been devoted to the lecture by the teacher. Sometimes the questioning breaks into the recitation period and is both preceded and followed by statements made by the teacher. The latter is usually the case in the lower grades, for in general the length of a recitation in these schools is forty-five minutes.

What has been said with regard to the geography class is typical of all of the work which is done in these schools. History is taught in exactly the same way by statements from the teacher followed by recitations in which the children are required to reproduce what the teacher has said. From time to time a review is undertaken of longer periods. The individual members of the class are called upon to give lengthy descriptions of the periods they have been studying on earlier days. The recitations in history are thus sometimes different from the ordinary recitation in geography in that the pupils give a longer and more coherent statement than is common in the geography recitation.

The work in arithmetic is carried on orally. Here the method differs somewhat from the work in geography and history above described. The teacher gives sums or other problems which the children are required to work out in their heads. It is very impressive to an American visitor to see how far this work can be carried with children in the elementary school. They become rapid and efficient in solving arithmetic problems, and not only this, but they show great retentiveness for the problems dictated by the teacher. When a child makes a mistake in giving an answer he is called upon to repeat the figures given by the teacher, and even when he is mistaken about the result he succeeds in remembering the details of the problem. As a method of teaching arithmetic there can be no doubt that this is much more efficient on the mechanical side than the methods ordinarily found in American schools.

The writer had an opportunity in one of the smaller schools near Berlin, through the courtesy of one of the inspectors, to observe

results in turning children who were very efficient in mental arithmetic to the task of working out some problems on paper. These children were evidently not by any means as efficient in written work as they had been in the oral work. They divided a number of five digits by nine and employed long division as a means of obtaining the result. They were slower than a similar group of American children would be in doing this work and evidently were by no means as much at home with paper and pencil as with mental arithmetic.

The instruction in the vernacular which children receive in the German elementary school is only in very small part, as contrasted with our American practice training in oral reading. Instruction in the vernacular consists very largely in learning by heart sections of the classical literature of the German language. In connection with each of these selections the children learn the name of the author and the date of composition and very frequently the circumstances under which it was written. They recite what they have learned either individually or in concert. One gets the impression that much of this is very abstract. The material is selected without any such deference to the maturity of the children as is to be seen in most American readers. When the children read orally, as they do less frequently than in our schools, the reading-material is of the most formal type.

The contrast between the American and German methods of instruction can perhaps be explained in part if not altogether by reference to the history of German schools as contrasted with the history of American elementary education.

The German school originated as a catechism school. Its chief function was to give religious instruction and the method of this religious instruction was not very different from that which is adopted now in all of the classes. Indeed one is reminded continually in visiting German schools of this fundamental interest in religion. Four periods a week are devoted in all of the elementary schools in Germany to religious instruction. Sometimes this instruction consists of church history; sometimes of a careful analysis of some portion of scripture; sometimes of a discussion of dogmatic moral beliefs. Schools are divided into Protestant,

Roman Catholic, and Jewish, and the sharpest lines of division within the class are recognized whenever religion is the subject of instruction.

The American school, on the other hand, was at its beginning and has continued to be throughout its history a reading school. The early legislation in the New England colonies shows that the Puritans wanted the children to read for themselves. So emphatic was this desire to cultivate reading that even handwriting and arithmetic came in slowly as secondary subjects of instruction. The reading school of New England has gradually extended so as to include geography and history and other subjects in which children can prepare themselves by reading textbooks at home. American schools are supplied with textbooks which cannot be equaled in point of variety and number and quality by any in the world. The class exercises in American schools refer to reading-matter while the class exercises in the German schools are catechisms based upon information supplied by the teacher.

This contrast between the two schools becomes the more interesting when one reads the criticisms that are made in Germany of the *Volksschule*. A careful German observer like Dr. Kerschensteiner, who has had an opportunity to compare from the German point of view our methods of instruction with those familiar to him in Germany, emphasizes the fact that our American children are much more independent in their ideas than are the children trained in German schools. Dr. Kerschensteiner also called attention to the fact that our children read more and rely more upon the books which they read for their ideas. In a number of German cities one finds at the present time a disposition to prepare textbook material to put into the hands of children. There is evidently a feeling on the part of the teachers in these schools that information must be given to supplement that which the teacher can present in class lectures.

As soon as an American observer becomes convinced of this fundamental distinction between the American school and the German school, he naturally asks himself what are the advantages of the German method and what are its disadvantages. Among the advantages he will notice first of all the close attention given

by the children to the statements presented by the teacher. If the teacher has an impressive personality, oral instruction undoubtedly can be made very effective. The teacher always has the advantage, furthermore, of being the sole source of information. There is no disposition on the part of a child to call in question any part of any statement which is made to him. There is, therefore, none of the critical attitude so often found in American schools. Doubtless there are other and broader social reasons for the personal respect in which German children hold their teachers, but certainly these broader social grounds for respect are powerfully reinforced by the fact that the teacher is the source of information to the class.

In the second place, an advantage which is apparent, especially in arithmetic, is that the children keep in mind a great number of details. Arithmetic is perhaps the most striking example, but the same fact appears in other subjects as well. The American child has before him a book and he knows that at any time he can get the details which he has read there. There is danger that he will rely upon his book for his details and not be as keen to keep them in mind. One very striking illustration of this came under the notice of the writer in a mathematics class in one of the higher schools. The class was given instruction in plane geometry without any figure upon the board or at their seats. The instructor appeared before the class and drew a circle in the air. He then drew the diameter and tangent and proceeded to demonstrate the method of measuring the angle between these two lines, depending entirely upon the ability of the students to visualize the figure and keep it in mind. This instructor said that it was not common in mathematics instruction to rely upon students in this fashion, but that he had found it very advantageous to induce students to get the matter in their own minds rather than to rely upon the board. This is undoubtedly an extreme illustration, but it brings out clearly the advantages of removing from the student all aids outside of himself. The student is stimulated to pay close attention to the matter of presentation and he is trained in a valuable form of memory. Perhaps the training might be compared to the familiar type of memory work in American classes known as flash-writing.

The third advantage, which might be regarded as somewhat doubtful, is the advantage that comes from requiring the teachers to keep themselves fully informed on the subjects of instruction. Certainly with the demand upon him that he give the details of the geography lesson, it is obvious that the teacher must be prepared on the geography lesson somewhat more fully than if it is his duty merely to hear the recitation upon a book. It is a well-known fact that the teachers in German schools have been raised by such requirements to a higher level of academic excellence than the teachers of any other country. Without uniform and intensive requirement of training the whole scheme would be entirely hopeless.

This statement suggests the turning-point in the discussion and leaves us to comment briefly upon some of the obvious disadvantages of the German method of instruction. No one who observes the German schools can fail to recognize the fact that the teachers do not fulfil the ideal which is referred to in the last paragraph. They do not know all of the facts which they ought to know to give efficient instruction in the subjects which actually come up in the class. Sometimes they give positive misinformation to students. Such misinformation can of course appear in an American classroom as well as in a German classroom, but the safeguards which are fenced about the American teacher are much more numerous. If a mistake about a geographical fact appears in the textbook it is sure to be corrected; and if it arises in class discussion it is likely to be corrected sooner or later by some pupil who has had opportunity to read in a supplementary reader about the subject which the teacher is discussing. The present writer observed several striking examples of the inability of the German teachers to carry the full body of the information in mind. If these observations can be made by a visitor who attends somewhat less than fifty classes of the type under discussion, the actual mistakes in instruction must be fairly numerous in the course of the year in all of the *Volksschulen* of Germany.

German teachers themselves, when this difficulty is pointed out, recognize it as one of the problems of their profession and are making an effort, as indicated above, to reduce the material which they need for the schools to more definite form.

The second very noticeable disadvantage of the German method has already been referred to. Children do not learn to use books freely and they go out into later life without the preparation for reading that our American students have. To be sure, many of our American graduates of the elementary school do not read books as freely as we might desire. There is an absence of acquaintance with technical mechanical literature that would be advantageous to the ordinary mechanic or ordinary housewife, and yet the American school child has handled enough books to be familiar with that mode of getting information and he is likely to have a number of books in his home just because he is familiar with books and their use. In later life his children will certainly be encouraged to get books when they go to the elementary school and he will have an appreciation of the value of books for the education of his family. The situation is very different in the homes of the graduates of the German *Volksschule*. Here books are relatively strange and unfamiliar. When the child of the family goes to school the need of books is not as clearly recognized as it is in the American home.

The German critic of American schools might be disposed to point to our voluminous periodical literature as one of the evil consequences of this reading-habit and doubtless we should have to admit that the overuse of the printing press is one of the dangers of modern American life. Perhaps the disadvantage is not all on the side of the German schools, but to the American observer who is interested in promoting reading as one of the chief features of the American school the German *Volksschule* seems to be very meager in its training of pupils.

The third disadvantage, which can be referred to only in a somewhat vague and abstract way, is the disadvantage which the German school exhibits in that it tends to train its pupils in a very dogmatic, authoritative fashion. To be sure, the German *Volksschule* is not intended to be the training school for the leaders in German life. The boys and girls who get into the German *Volksschule* are not expected to attend any higher school and it is not expected that they will occupy positions of influence in social life or in the government. Most of the positions which would give them influence are closed because one of the requirements for

admission to such positions is completion of education in one of the higher schools. Perhaps this general social fact is more significant than the method of instruction in explaining why the German child in the *Volksschule* is very much under the authority and domination of the teacher and the system which is training him. Perhaps this also justifies in the minds of the German authorities the relatively narrow course of study which is administered. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that the method of instruction is the natural outgrowth of the social attitude which is back of the school and tends to perpetuate this social attitude among the children. The teacher stands before the class as a representative of the government as well as of the older generation. The teacher is himself dominated by the system, in that the course of study which he administers is prescribed from the central school authorities. The church determines the classification of the school in which he teaches and the type of religious instruction which shall be given. Everywhere there is evidence that the individual must be subordinated to the general system. This spirit appears in the methods of instruction as well as in the general social organization surrounding the schools, and when one comes from a relatively free and undogmatic American school into one of these German schools he is instantly impressed by the subordination of the individual child to the scheme of organization.

Again, there is doubtless something to be said on the side of the German schools. Perhaps here also the German observer would hardly admit that the criticisms referred to should be classified as disadvantages of that educational system. But the American comes back to the schools with which he is familiar satisfied that much would be lost if a fundamental change were made in the methods of instruction and the spirit of enthusiasm in the American classroom to conform to that which he observed in the German *Volksschule*.